ABSTRACT

The drive to bring equality and contextual justice in society demands for the inclusion and incorporation of women’s experience, to model the whole research method, by carrying out a feminist criticism of the texts. This research is founded on the textual analysis and close reading of the texts. Furthermore, the potential reasons influencing the author’s technique in developing female characters is also being discussed. Research methodology would focus on the sources available in libraries and on internet. Primary source materials are used aptly, such as creative works of Kapur, which were written before the commencement of the study. Secondary sources examine textbook articles, publication and criticism, the synopsis is based on the preceding findings of the study.

The aims and objectives of the research are to understand how the novelist has presented her women characters; to point out the issues that have been formative in the formation of the characters; to unearth the pathetic condition of the middle class women who belong to well to do families; to see how women voice their misery and objection; to explore whether there have been any changes in the approaches and techniques in voicing the beleaguered women in a female writer’s novels.

The scope and limitation of the study pertains to the idea that feminism is not just a European or an American marvel, it comprised the analysis of the arguments and emancipating possibilities evoked in the translation of feminism into a non-Western context, basically, an Indian one. The concept of equality, which is a core issue in the field of feminism, in relation to individual’s liberty is an alien idea to Indian society, due to the very complex hierarchical structure of the society.
I have discussed the characters and major themes in the works of Kapur’s contemporaries, which include at least five Indian women novelists. For example, Kamla Markandaya’s work is analysed on the basis of how she has given preference to cultural identity over religious and ethnic communities. Nayantara Sahgal portrayed the images of aristocratic women who have entered politics. Anita Desai portrayed the suppressed and oppressed women who are also victims of social misbeliefs and taboos. She discovered the psychotic subconscious of the Indian women. Githa Harihariharan painted the marriage of middle class women who could not be gratified in confining their roles to that of a mother and wife in a patriarchal world. Shashi Deshpande’s major apprehension was in portraying the agony and the battle of the modern educated woman who is trapped between patriarchy and convention; additionally she worked on individualism, and liberation for the womanhood.

Some themes that Desai focuses on are as mentioned: to challenge patriarchy through the textual affirmation of women’s experience, despite using a patriarchal language, she has formulated new characters and role models to follow and to promulgate a new pattern of life for women. This too in a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas while marital bliss and women’s role at home are a central focus. Woman’s portrayal has become more emphatic, assertive, more freed in their view and more eloquent in their demeanor as compared to the woman of the past.

Chapter II

This chapter is an endeavor to establish a critical understanding of the women characters in the novel *Difficult Daughters*, which is achieved through the close reading of the writing in
the light of relatable feminist theories. Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, is critically examined through the above mentioned method.

To empower oppressed women’s opinion and voice, Kapur delineates her women characters with a discourse that is absent in the craft of the prominent male novelists of the canon. Women characters are made void of speech; much like Richardson’s Clarissa who is not only raped, but made bereft of discourse also. By providing voice to voiceless women Kapur is not just depicting a ‘New Woman’ but has confronted the patriarchal portrayal of women too.

To epitomize voice in literary text, Kapur attributed complete sentences to her women characters that consist of rational and emotional words in a proper syntactical order. Such kind of writing style was very rare in women’s writing during that point of time. Women writers always face criticism over their writing style. A lack of social space and isolation coax women’s writing into subversion of syntactical order, incomplete sentences and emotional outpouring. Sharing of personal experiences with their emotions was perceived as a symbol of feminine instability in women characters. Kapur and her contemporary novelists defy such kind of imposition on their writing by developing a new kind of writing style that helps in the representation of real women.

Kapur follows not just a change in writing style, but also follows those issues and relations of women that were always undervalued in traditional writing and criticism. ‘Mirroring of mothers and daughters’ or ‘textual moments of mother/daughter empathy’ have been given prominence in her writing. Kapur in *Difficult Daughters* challenges traditional representations of mother-daughter relationship. It is something that faces
patriarchal marginalization in male writing. She depicts women of three generation namely Kasturi, Virmati and Ida. None of them have a pleasant relationship with their mothers.

Such representations defy the conventional image of mothers who sacrifice everything for their children while children do the same in return. Kapur like an iconoclast breaks such images and portrays women like Ida who says that she never wants to be like her mother. It shows another aspects of women psyche which is absent in male writings that show women in accordance with the prevailing ideological, cultural and social norms.

The emergence of prosperity and progress after liberalization empowered the women of middle class enough to obtain education more freely. This results in an exposure of women’s experiences and issues in public domain. Kapur opts this method and chooses to depict middle class women.

Chapter III

Feminists have always strained to create new concepts and vocabularies to share and express the experiences of women and to address absences in existing knowledge by highlighting flaws in language, knowledge system and discourses that are constructed by patriarchy. The experiences of woman-woman relationship who do not share a blood bond, although bound by other relationships, sharing special bonds, work as a theme for Kapur. To show such kind of bonds she has constructed the aforementioned characters in a positive light that have been missing in the works of male writers. This is due to the absence of their experience of women psyche and a limited vocabulary that is constructed to favour, help and maintain patriarchy.
Women’s sexuality in male writing is shown in a negative light. The latter use it as a tool to marginalize women. Patriarchy always suppresses women’s sexuality because they perceive it as a threat to male supremacy. Literature in the hand of men has successfully maintained a constructed notion of sexuality and has been to certain extent, androcentric and in favour of benevolent sexism which is a personal affirmative notion of protection, ennoblement, and endearment focused on women. Such hostile sexism helps to validate women’s subservient position to men. Not only literature, but society also has a negative impression of women’s expression of sexuality.

The understanding of sexuality is materialized when it is understood in relation to widely varying phenomena, from physiological drives to structures of language. The representation and interpretation of sexuality varies as culture varies. Sexuality is a socially and culturally constructed notion. This construction subverts, suppresses an actual self and promotes a constructed one. It gets strength from cultural practices and society. It empowers one group over other.

The relationship between two women is presented in a positive light. This, in the form of an issue, worked as a theme of A Married Woman (2002), through the characters of Astha and Peeplika. Such a relationship faces social discrimination due to absence of a positive term, and gets categorized negatively with assistance from language. Kapur, known for raising the issue of ‘Women’, does not mention the term ‘Lesbian’ to term the relationship which has a negative connotation in patriarchal discourse since it depicts women in a bad light and denies them a right over their sexuality. Patriarchy is always known for controlling women's sexuality, to maintain and sustain dominance. Patriarchy has always denied a positive term to such relationships.
The theme of women’s sexuality has been evaluated on the basis of psychoanalytical theory to analyse the relation between Astha’s sexuality and its expression. It designates the connection between women’s unconscious, women’s reproductive organs and their demonstration in women discourse.

Kapur refrains herself from imposing any lesbian identity to Astha, because from a poststructuralist perspective, the self is fragmented, it serves as an antithesis to construct any identity. In the light of this notion Kapur is unable to give a concrete identity and term to explain and justify the relationship between Astha and Pipeelika. Kapur has taken a middle path of radical feminism and lesbian feminism to formulate and address the issues of women in Indian context through the relationship of Astha and Pipeelika.

Chapter IV

Kapur's *Home* (2006), the third novel, in the line of resistance to patriarchy deals with the issues of reproduction, the sexual division of labour and, representation and role of women in the family. These issues were raised and prominent during the feminist movements across the world and as Kapur is known for crafting characters that directly deal with women’s core issues.

To demonstrate the issue of ‘representation’, understanding of gender politics is very important. It means gendered identities and gender differences between man and woman; and a division of labour. The latter means particular chores that have been devised for specific genders and one is not supposed to breach the watertight division of gender, if anyone tries to do that, he/she will face a social boycott or get discriminated against in certain groups. Kapur portrays
Nisha, who blurs, to a certain extent, the constructed division of labour by opening her own shop called Nisha’s Creation.

In this novel, Kapur has brought up a new facet of a woman to demonstrate the gender division in relation to the materialist analysis of Indian middle class. She, in her novels, for the most part, has composed male and female relationships. The depiction of daily lives and struggles of women provides a space and is counterhegemonic to the discourse which has ostracized the women and their lives and is preferable to patriarchy. Kapur carries women out of their discursive categories by keeping them in the centre. The space provided to women gives them an agency through which they assert their identity.

Nisha challenges patriarchy as she is no more detached and meek, however, a sort of woman who can possibly change customary whimsical considerations and emotions. Apart from this, her excitements for education and to be skilled in men’s occupation is, for the most part, to be financially autonomous. It enhances the notion of womanhood and demonstrates her existence in a way that she needs to satisfy her desires and finds the idea absolutely relevant. She defies the conventional ideas of ‘Blessed messenger or angel in the house’ and ‘sexually insatiable picture’. She is principally a woman who is mindful of what she does and taking cognizance of her low position in the family and society and trying to enhance it by being economically independent.

Nisha demystifies the ideologies that is governing her conscious life. Her education and ability to question empowers her to realised that she is being subjugated. This investigation has risen after a great adventure into the enquiry of her compelling
impulse to be recognized as an autonomous individual and a sovereign self with free thinking and soul. In the meantime, she additionally battles to acquire changes in society through the cancellation of sexist demeanors and male-centric control. She investigates the possibility of her space, agency and the significance in the male dominated society which indicates the characteristics of new women.

The consciousness of women can be expressed directly in writing but it underestimates the role language and ideology, as they are constructed by patriarchy, in the formation of a literary creation. Woman’s writing advances attack on patriarchy by creating new role models and new patterns of living. But while doing an analysis it draws attention to the issue of isolation of the text from the writer, though it might abscond from a number of issues and experiences of women which could radically transform literary depictions. The relation between author and text is needed to represent the women characters either in terms of realism or stereotype.

Chapter V

The Immigrant deals with the issues of women’s identity and struggles in a foreign land. Nina, the protagonist, an immigrant, leaves her land for a new land where she forms a new identity. The immigrant suffers from the double identity or identity in flux. Nina wants to adapt her personality according to the new land’s culture, but, at the same time, she wants to maintain the identity of her own culture. In this dilemma, she is unable to forge any identity: even if she accepts the culture of the new land, her appearance remains the same as before. She cannot escape from the personality of her native place. She can go anywhere, but her inherent qualities cannot change. She can gain new qualities of new cultures to enrich her
personality, but her identity will not be pure or absolute. It will be a mix of two or more cultures, it can never be natural, because one can change one’s getup, but not one’s fundamental appearance.

An immigrant willingly wants to be a part of a new culture by changing her personality. She tries her best to change herself, but in the new world people are used to some strange ideals that they expect an immigrant to follow, therefore that immigrant is facing a conflict within her own mind, whether to accept it or reject it. She compares it with her own ‘self’, yet she often fails to find a solution or a concrete answer. This dilemma of acceptance or rejection of norms runs through her whole life in the new culture. Her identity swings between two cultures. Her identity becomes a mixture that is not fully accepted either by the new culture or by her own culture. She lives a very strange kind of identity: she thinks that she is accepted by the new culture, but, her acceptance in it always remains questionable. She fails to end this dilemma and remains a double identity.

Nina, who has been given an ascribed identity aspires for her own self. Once she leaves India for Canada, as an immigrant, the aspects of her identity related to her country are broken. The interruption leaves gaps in the personality and these gaps create an anxiety in her which is reflected in her attire, pursuing a library science course to get a job etc. The gaps and anxiety coax her to frame a new identity according to the borrowed culture and society.

Chapter VI

*Custody*, being inspired by globalization and liberalization, is set in the milieu of urban upper middle class families of Delhi. It expresses the hollowness of modern life that
is, lack of values and morals, which some critics believe is a direct result of globalization. This novel view marital relations in an entirely new perspective, totally different from traditional practices of Indian marriage system in which a woman scarifies everything for the sake of marriage, but here the opposite happens, a woman sacrifices her marriage for the sake of a good life. It is explored through the character of Shagun. She is just demanding for her own space and identity which was taken away from her. Women, it seems, from the times of creation (as is depicted in religious texts and rituals) could be happy only when married and bound to home, outside marriage they cannot be satisfied.

It deals with the impact of globalization on women and their relationship with men from an entirely new perspective. The character of the protagonist is examined through the lance of metropolitan feminism because the issues occurred or raised in the chapter are not compatible with the grass root women and their marginalization.

Chapter VII

The characters of Kapur’s novels mimic, if New Criticism of the texts is eluded, the life of Kapur herself. Indirectly, Kapur has developed the characters on the basis of her experience. Women’s experience which has no space in existing knowledge gets a space in her writing through the help of male centered language. The use of the male language gives Kapur experience, an agency to produce the characters who share the authority which has always been seen as a male authority.

Authority is missing in the works of women writers because suppressed, marginalized and ostracized women class do not have the agency, space and voice to frame their experience. By their writing they create their agency and portray powerful women who
assert their space and agency, dismantle the hierarchy and bring the core women issues in the center of the discourse.

There are certain areas and issues which are left untouched in Kapur’s work or maybe she couldn’t articulate them well. The issues, which work as pertinent themes in the works of her contemporary women novelists, are neglected in her works. Some significant questions regarding her works are -

Does she justify her women characters? Does she succeed in portraying a nuanced understanding of social realities like, female infanticide, child marriage, purdah and restrictions on female education? Kapur’s women are well educated but, in reality, they are not free to acquire education in the patriarchal society of India. She does not tackle the above mentioned issues but Nayantara Shegal has cogently addressed such issues in her work Mistaken Identity in which they are the central thematic concerns of her book.

Kapur remains silent on issues of violence against women like rape, domestic abuse, deaths due to dowry, sexual violence etc. Such issues are major themes in Markandaya’s novel Two Virgins and Anita Desai’s Fire on the Mountain. Sexual violence is also a major thematic concern in Shashi Deshpande’s novels.

Manju Kapur presents the characters who are suffering, physically whereas Anita Desai’s psychological novels portray the image of suffering women preoccupied with their inner space, their sulking frustration and mental storm within their bodies. This leads to an existential crisis in their journey. Her novels do not focus on the characters’ daily life, for example, women use various beauty products to enhance their looks and a number of women are obsessed with such products in order to fit into the mainstream patriarchal standards of
beauty. This charge may be trivialized by the argument that Kapur does not depict doll-like women, but strong women who can burst the myth of beauty.

Kapur’s presentation of middle class is lacking in comparison to Austen’s swiping, intricate, and minute capture of rural life in her works. One reason for this may be that both Austen and Kapur rarely bothered to depict lower classes. A common criticism of Austen’s and Kapur’s work is that they depict a sanitized world which ignores unpleasant matters related to poverty and crime. Being a post liberal writer, Kapur has managed to escape the aura of Austen, who is colossal in women’s writing. Kapur plots her novels within a concrete historical and political context. Austen on the other hand did not directly depict or comment on contemporary political affairs and events and included them only in terms of the effect they had on the provincial domestic lives of her characters.

Kapur also fails to emphasise caste-based characters - a harsh reality of Indian society. In comparison to Austen she miserably fails in providing a proper representation of women of all classes and castes. Her limitations do not end here. She, to some extent, totally ignores the caste system and its impact on women. The effects of caste system on the lives of women, even modern women, is undeniable, ignoring such a glaring issue of the Indian society detracts one from her work. Caste system is a sad reality of the contemporary era of Indian continent in which Kapur writes. It becomes difficult for readers to relate themselves with the characters and to have any real empathy or sympathy for the suffering and pitiable conditions of these characters. Again this charge can be undercut by the argument that, being a post-liberal writer, she has dismissed caste politics which only suppresses the women from the lower castes and class. This is a way to bring marginalized class, basically women, on equal ground and not just by emphasizing their castes.
In her novels, Kapur has missed an opportunity to explore various aspects of the lives of women who are economically weak. In this aspect she may be equated with Jane Austen, as both of them have concentrated their efforts on the depiction of middle classes. Both the authors engaged with the lives of higher or economically well settled families. Economic deprivation or poverty is a harsh reality of the developing countries, it is indeed absurd and limiting to ignore this and focus on the upper classes. This again is an indication of the limited horizon in the depiction of the picture of life in her works.